

KING JAMES, REVISED

History's best seller turns 400

A century ago, on the three-hundredth birthday of the King James Version of the Holy Bible, Theodore Roosevelt said that "no other book of any kind ever written in English—perhaps no other book ever written in any other tongue—has ever so affected the whole life of a people." Today that effect may be less obvious. Reading the King James Bible aloud is no longer the cornerstone of an American education, even for the religiously devout; none of the major Christian denominations use the King James Version as their primary scripture, opting instead for more recent, "accessible" translations. Yet the language of the King James Bible remains our language, and not just by way of the countless biblical phrases—from "a drop in the bucket" to "you reap what you sow"—that are still pervasive in contemporary English. As scholar and biblical translator Robert Alter writes, the language of the 1611 translation "continued to suffuse the culture even when the fervid faith in Scripture as revelation had begun to fade."

With this legacy in mind, *Harper's Magazine* marked the quadricentennial of the King James Bible by inviting some of our finest poets and novelists to select a verse or short passage from the translation and respond to it, with no restrictions on the form of this response. Taken together, the results remind us of what Edmund Wilson once wrote about biblical language, that our culture never "seems quite to accommodate it. Yet we find we have been living with it all our lives."

Paul Guest was recently named a 2011 Guggenheim Fellow in Poetry.

Howard Jacobson's novels include *The Mighty Walzer*, *Kalooki Nights*, and *The Finkler Question*, which won the 2010 Man Booker Prize for Fiction.

Benjamin Hale is the author of the novel *The Evolution of Bruno Littlemore*.

Charles Baxter is the author of several books of fiction, poetry, and criticism.

John Banville's most recent novel is *The Infinities*.

Dan Chiasson is the author of four books, including the poetry collection *Where's the Moon, There's the Moon*.

Marilynne Robinson's most recent book is *Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self*.

Illustrations by Andrea Dezsö



WHAT WE MAY BE

By Marilynne Robinson

Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, In the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.

—1 Corinthians 15:51–52

The whole of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is beautiful. But just here there is a rise in the language, a pent joy, a vision under profound restraint, that is like nothing else. "Lo! I tell you a mystery," as the Revised Standard Version has it, "We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye." Paul is telling his new converts that, at the end of things, we will be changed from human beings into human beings, from the first Adam to the second Adam—"Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven." Ophelia says, "Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be." It is the voice of life, disheartened with itself and yearning for more life, for the other self or selves we know most intimately in their elusiveness.

The phrase "in the twinkling of an eye" appears here first in the fourteenth-century translation of the Latin Vulgate made by John Wycliffe and others. Paul wrote in Greek "in the blink of an eye," and Jerome rendered this faithfully as *in ictu oculi*. The Wycliffites took a word from the unaccountably rich vocabulary the ancestors of the English language created to mark subtle differences in the appearance of light, enabling all their generations of descendants to distinguish a glitter, a glimmer, a shimmer. Or the translators simply adopted an idiom. This was the period of Chaucer and Langland, when a robust vernacular literature flourished, taking its pleasures from the vividness and ingenuity of common speech. In Chaucer one finds "hise eyen twynkled" and "a litel shymeryng of a light." So far as I can discover, every major English translation has followed Wycliffe in this detail, including the King James Version of 1611.

This very ingratifying, very human image seems to me to interpret the passage, or to leave a trace of the intention with which Wycliffe and others around him did their work. Wycliffe, an Oxford professor, was burned for his labors. He died a natural death but was exhumed in order to be burned, a fact that speaks tellingly of the potency of the barrier he had breached with his translation. At the time his Bible was first circulating, the great Peasants' Revolt, a failed rebellion against poverty and repression, had just ended, and this no doubt made the populism of the project particularly objectionable to the authorities. And in fact

Wycliffe was associated with a movement called Lollardy. The Lollards were preachers, at first Oxford students, who went out under cover of night to read to the poor in the countryside from the English Bible. They were violently suppressed, yet their movement persisted into the sixteenth century, when it merged with the Reformation.

These days the Bible seems to be used largely to shore up authority, or to legitimize political interests that claim a special fealty to Christianity. The Bible is much thumped and little pondered. So it may not be obvious why people living in the Middle Ages who enjoyed the rare privilege of literacy would have put themselves at terrible risk in order to carry Scripture into the hovels of the poor and defeated. "Gospel" is itself an old English word meaning glad tidings or good news. So perhaps enough of the first meaning still clung to it to give Wycliffe's translation of *evangelium* as "gospel" a special power.

"Beholde I shewe a mistery unto you." These are the words of William Tyndale, another Oxford scholar, who completed his version of the New Testament in 1526. But he was, he said, making a translation that a plowman would understand. Much of the celebrated beauty of the King James Bible is owed to Tyndale, and to his imagined readership, the plowman, whose language he returned to him in this extraordinary, very loving work. Tyndale was burned for his labors.

These are the origins of the Bible in English, the vehemently unauthorized precursors of the Authorized Version of 1611, or the King James Version, as we call it in America. Its greatness is owed in large part to the fact that it has preserved much that is best in the work of its martyrs, including a sense of the urgent generosity that lay behind their words. Imagine a tonsured youth taking a page or two of Scripture from his sleeve and kneeling to read, by some small, furtive light that, since it played on English faces, flickered or gleamed. "We shall all be chaunged, and that in a moment, and the twyncklynge of an eye." He'd have been reading to old Adam the delver, the man of earth, the bearer of the primordial curse whose toil was grossly embittered by the impositions of his fellow men. And in the quiet of the peril they shared he'd have brought him the vision of himself as the new Adam, not burdened and coerced by the needs of his hungry body and by the entrapments of his degraded condition, but wholly conformed to himself as a living soul. We know what we are, but we know not what we may be. Anyone who speaks English understands what is meant by the twinkling of an eye, that genial look of inward pleasure that cannot be mistaken and cannot be feigned. It passes even between strangers like a shared secret, a sign of deep human recognition. Lo, I tell you a mystery. ■